



The Interstate at 50

DOUG HEINS, P.E. **Survey Party Chief - I-35**

Building roadways 50 years ago was vastly different than our modern methods. Funding for the system was approved in late 1956 and grading in Iowa began in the spring of 1957. Here are the recollections of former DOT employee, Doug Heins, who worked on Interstate 35.



*Looking down the I-35
centerline near Cumming*

I am submitting some unconnected paragraphs of my recollections of the first year or two of interstate construction in central Iowa. It was amazing to me that the interstate bill was passed in the summer of 1956 and we were grading in April 1957. We couldn't begin to do that today.

The initial call up

I was assigned to the Marshalltown office when the call came out for the offices around the state to loan survey crews to the Des Moines construction office. Since I was single and able to chief a survey party, I formed a new survey party out for loan from a group of recent "Roads Scholars" (a winter school for new employees) and two other new employees.

It was thought that since we had been able to accomplish 40 miles of grading a year in the past, we should be able to grade the interstate from just north of Osceola to Merle Hay road in a year. That didn't take into account that there is quite a difference between grading 40 miles of two-lane road over the hills and four-lanes of freeway through the hills.

Supply shortage

We were often short on supplies. There was a shortage of tires so we would rob the spare tires from other DOT vehicles. We had cars running around with two or three different colored wheels. One day we took an old Chevy station wagon to Ames to pick up equipment, but central supply was out of transits. We had to borrow a transit from other parties to run line before we could slope stake.

One place we had pipe culverts under the mainline and two frontage roads which we were able to do from one setup. We were calling for line for the pipe ends and an apron. Soon the instrument man asked if we were staking every joint. There were crews and inspectors from all over the state and when we got together the rumors would fly. After a few weeks it came through that we were being recalled to Marshalltown. We didn't want to go back, so we hid out on the job until we had to go in for more stakes. By that time the recall had been overruled.

Pay phone

Later my survey crew was taken away from me, and I was put in charge of survey work and inspection on much of the Warren County interstate. They moved in an old lab trailer into an old maintenance lot in St. Charles, mostly as a phone booth and a place to store plans and cross sections. I went in one day to use the old crank phone and gave it a good crank, but couldn't reach the operator. A couple of more cranks returned no response. I charged into the telephone office and found that through all the confusion on the job site, the bill had not been paid and service had been cut off.

Well drained

In the big cut south of Iowa 92 where we were cutting in hard clay, we hit a vein of gravel and water went running down the ditch. A few weeks later the farmer claimed we had drained his spring. I was sent to investigate and found a wood basin with a willow tree growing nearby. It looked like he had a valid claim.

Stuck in the mud

We took a short cut off a dirt road just north of the Truro gas pumping station to avoid the active grading. Each day the cut got deeper and one day I didn't get quite to the top. The car slid down on the back bumper. When we got it back on four wheels it would start, but not run until we cleaned the dirt out of the tailpipe.



Growing concern

The contractor building the Middle River Bridge used false work piling that had not been debarked and it grew small branches and leaves.

The locals

The cafes in the small towns along I-35 enjoyed a couple of boom years with all the state crews and contractor help. We soon knew some of the local people. Some of the bridge and culvert crews set up small, onsite concrete plants. The mixers were supposed to have batch meters, but some didn't work and we didn't have a lot of success getting them repaired. One of the cafe owners had been a construction worker, so one day one of the inspectors leaned over and told another that people from Ames were coming to check the batch meters. The owner was listening and passed on the information and the meters were soon repaired. It was all made up but it worked.

Davis-Bacon Law

The government determined the prevailing wages for each type and size of equipment. We had to go out with the federal Bureau of Public Roads people to ask each worker if he had been paid the same as the contractor reported. The same contractor had the grading contracts for the mainline and New Virginia stub. They had people operating the same type of equipment turning around in the same area that were being paid at two different rates since the stub was not covered by Davis-Bacon.

Good help is hard to find

In November 1957 they opened a second Des Moines office to carry the extra load. I went back to Marshalltown just before Thanksgiving, but the following Monday we got a call that the new engineer was in Iowa Methodist with ulcers. I was in back in Des Moines before noon and ran the office into early 1958. They sent a bunch of new graduate engineers to staff the office. This was one of the most enjoyable times of my nearly 40 years with the state. They were smart and enthusiastic, but not used to our methods. I didn't have time to give them a lot of supervision. One time a form came in and I told one of the guys that the way he filled out the form was perfectly logical, but that was not the way we did it. Of that group at least three became county engineers and one was later our chief maintenance engineer.

We needed to fill out the crew so I called the state employment office to fill six or seven positions. They tapped the bottom of the barrel and called to see if I had hired them all. One person was applying for the office assistant position. One man who completed the application read country of birth as county of birth which he filled in POKE. He was not hired. I told the employment office I wanted to interview some more, and they sent better applicants. The word got out on the street and I found qualified people. One person hired later became a resident maintenance engineer.

Season's over (or is it?)

We were working on I-35/80 just north of Des Moines with a contractor from South Dakota. A nice snow fell on Christmas Day. The inspector on the job told the contractor to go home because the season was over, but headquarters had a different idea. The wet clay froze on the sheepsfoot roller so that it was a corrugated drum. After several times when we cleaned it only to last one or two rounds, we decided it was better to keep rolling. On the Lower Beaver road overpass the grade gave way causing huge cracks to form. (picture)

Where the buffalo roam

The grading of I-35 just south of the Dows interchange was delayed for a short time by a herd of buffalo. They had become trapped in swamp eons ago. It was soon decided that enough information was already available from that time period that it was not necessary to preserve them.

Ambulance chaser

At a hearing for the original route of I-35 held in Lake Mills the usual Aerial photos were posted on the wall. A local lawyer would stand back and watch as landowners would point out their property. He would then step up and offer to help them.

As the route was later relocated with a diagonal path in Wright and Hamilton counties the landowners there were very upset. They might have been more likely to accept the location had it been determined by engineering principles, but when it was changed by politics that was too much. This resulted in many condemnations and condemnation appeals. We spent many weeks in court. One time as we were preparing for the first viewing I got stuck in the farmer's field and had to have him pull me out. They were very nice people and didn't hold me personally responsible. Many of the landowners did hold us personally responsible for the route and called "Communists," and various other names.

Walk a mile in my shoes

On I-35 in northern Iowa, survey crews needed special permission to travel out of state. The closest restaurant was in Emmons, Minn., so they parked on the state line road and walked into town.

The good old days

At one of the ribbon cuttings, the governor arrived in a buggy. It was a cold and blustery day and he looked nearly frozen.



Crack in fill - Beaver Road over I-35/80 north of Des Moines.

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